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Propriété intellectuelle

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RÉFÉRENCE

New York, PowerHouse Books, 2009, 127 p., color ill., \$45

- 1 *News Art: Manipulated Photographs from the Burns Archive* (Powerhouse Books, 2009), by Stanley B. Burns and Sara Cleary-Burns, showcases the authors' century-spanning collection of retouched press photographs. The catalogue-style book celebrates a historically controversial subject, which to date remains under researched, by positioning retouched press prints as unique works of art befitting of the auction block. Though *News Art* may have been published primarily for collectors, it presents scholars with the extraordinary opportunity to reconstruct – through visuals – the chronology of a highly prevalent, yet often invisible, technical practice.
- 2 Both collector and scholar will find intrigue in the rich cache of retouched press photographs held in the Burns Archive. *News Art* features a selection of more than one hundred color reproductions of retouched prints from the 1890s to the 1950s in a rare coming together of visual material. The striking cover photograph *Character Analysis of Murderess, 'The Iron Woman'* (1930) blends editorial retouching work with psychologist Dr. Duren J.H. Ward's phrenology-inspired analysis of a convicted killer, merging 1930s medicine and press picture editing in a manner also befitting of the Burns Archive (previous Burns books have pertained largely to medical photography).
- 3 Markedly, *News Art's* visual offerings reaffirm the picture editor's retouching work as having been a technical constant in the history of nineteenth and twentieth century press photography. The authors' selection of prints begins in the late nineteenth century with *Abraham Lincoln's Funeral Locomotive* (shot 1865; published 1895), a print retouched to add

clarity of detail, and concludes in the mid-twentieth century with *Assassination Attempt on President Truman* (1950), a press photograph turned into a narrative diagram. Arranged by decade, subject, and/or retouching technique, prints such as *Montage With Signed Drawing of Shooting, Signed by Artist 'Egg'* (1928) and *Photo Diagram/Montage: Nurse Farcie King Kills Patrolman Robert Evans, Shoots Herself* (1928), feature persons illustrated into photographic scenes to narrate tales of murder. A grouping of five aviator photographs from the 1920s and 1930s exemplifies the blotting out of background information to simplify head and shoulders portraiture. *Revenge: Kicking the Nazis Out of France* (1939) and *Russian Machine Gun Team in Germany* (1944) were retouched with black fluids to add sharpness of detail to soft-focus shots from Europe's war-torn streets.

- 4 *News Art's* reproductions pay homage to the varying states of disrepair afflicting these objects from decades past. Monotone photographs are reproduced in color, displaying a range of less than aesthetically perfect grays, sepias, oranges, and greens. Dog-eared corners, puckered edges, and crooked borders infer a physical existence; soiled print versos and yellowed newspaper clippings relay historical context. Prints are often laid out opposite their newsprint publications, encouraging comparisons between retouched photographs and disseminated newsprint images. But the photographs and newspaper pages found in *News Art* are more than just attention grabbing – they are useful. These reproductions hint strongly at the extent to which retouching continued to play an integral role in the making of news images during a period of six decades, wherein press photography developed greatly on many fronts, both technically and professionally.
- 5 The book's visuals make up for its lackluster survey-style introductory texts. Although the authors write perceptively about retouching work having served a dual purpose for the analogue press (to correct copy value and to enhance news value), they are at once quick to argue that retouching transforms the mass produced press print into a unique art object – a hand-worked collectable not unlike the painted daguerreotype, ambrotype, or tintype. In this regard, previous Burns publications *Forgotten Marriage: The Painted Tintype and The Decorative Frame, 1860–1910: A Lost Chapter in American Portraiture* (1995) and *Geisha: A Photographic History, 1872–1912* (2006) are named by the authors as precursors. Precisely what the use of retouching means to the history of photojournalism is, as such, overridden by the Burns's interest in this type of photographic object as a collectible.
- 6 In any case *News Art* presents an alluring documentation of the behind the scenes work of the press picture editor, showcasing an imperative technical process as it wove its way through the history of press photography, from the 1890s to the 1950s. A beautifully printed and well-assembled collector's guide, *News Art* could certainly encourage increased collecting – and may ultimately spur new scholarly writings on the history of press photography